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## AJC on Jewish Continuity

American Jewish Committee

### **Jewish Continuity: Policy Statement and Action Plan**

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#### **Background:**

American Jewry is experiencing two narratives. Jews enjoy greater opportunities than ever before to lead a creative Jewish life, and many are doing so to degrees never imagined by their parents and grandparents. Conversely, a larger number are choosing to withdraw from Jewish communal life. The 1990 National Jewish Population Study sounded a warning call to the community that the prospect of serious losses due to assimilation is quite real. Moreover, declining attachment to Judaism has already resulted in weakened attachment to Israel among Jews under age 45. Therefore, over the past five years, communal leaders have been debating how to respond to the widely-proclaimed crisis in Jewish continuity.

Certainly the change in rhetoric is significant. The Jewish community is stating clearly that our challenge for the next generation is ensuring the future survival and quality of Jewish life. Additionally, Federations have earmarked special funding for synagogue-based programming and have strengthened the Hillel Foundation as the central address for Jewish college programming. Jewish Community Centers have focused on ways to strengthen Jewish content and educational programming. Jewish day schools have grown significantly, notably in Conservative and Reform settings. Lastly, within Reform Judaism a very important shift is occurring to emphasize Judaic literacy for adult Reform Jews.

What has not happened is at least as important as what has occurred. First, no consensus exists as to critical communal priorities. Secondly, little has been done to address the high cost of leading an intensive Jewish life. Lastly, the community remains incapable of adopting a language of distinctive values and norms, articulating both what it is and what it is not.

The crisis is real, yet forms only part of the contemporary Jewish story. At the very same time that intermarriage has risen and rates of conversion to Judaism in mixed-marriages have plummeted, many Jews have enriched their lives Jewishly. Indeed, some of the finest vehicles for nurturing a creative Jewish life, e.g. Jewish day schools, summer camps, and synagogue-based havurot, have been developed within the American Jewish community.

In responding to the continuity crisis, communal leaders face a number of critical challenges. A lively debate about how to direct limited communal resources is taking place over questions such as: What initiatives are best able to combat widespread apathy to Jewish life? Who are the most likely targets for continuity initiatives--the unaffiliated or the marginally affiliated Jews interested in Jewish experiences but who lack the knowledge and capacity to transmit Jewish heritage? What do we mean by continuity and what is the goal of continuity initiatives? What can the community do to make Jewish life sufficiently compelling to retain current members and attract new adherents? Answers to these questions will guide

principles and strategies for communal action.

### **Principles and Recommendations:**

The goal of continuity efforts should be development of knowledgeable Jews who can make informed choices about the nature of their commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. In a free society, many will choose to leave, and for that reason some losses are virtually inevitable. Our goal should be to ensure that the choices Jews make are informed choices rather than out of ignorance. More knowledgeable Jews are, in all likelihood, going to choose to be more committed Jews.

Recommendation: AJC should initiate study courses and programs in chapters designed for their own members.

Leadership enhancement programs for both volunteers and professionals are necessary to transform the Judaic culture of Jewish organizations.

If Jewish continuity is indeed the primary challenge for this generation of American Jews, it will require a Jewishly-informed leadership to mobilize the community towards that elusive goal. The community should both minimize entry barriers and maintain high standards of involvement. Certainly, the community should be open and welcoming to all interested in leading a Jewish life. Programming itself, however, should aim to create highly involved Jews. There can be no continuity absent sincere commitment to Judaism. Torah has a claim upon all Jews-as record of revelation and as inspired text.

Recommendation: Family, synagogue, youth activities, and school are the primary vehicles of securing Jewish continuity. Funding and initiatives should be targeted to those institutions that can help Jews religiously and spiritually, strengthen Jewish families, and enhance Jewish knowledge. All Jewish institutions should be challenged to broaden their Jewish content and self-image, as has taken place, for example, in recent years at the American Jewish Committee through study programs, seminars, and Judaic literacy institutes.

All Jewish institutions should be encouraged to pursue Jewish experiences for their members and constituencies. The American Jewish Committee's William Petschek National Jewish Family Center requires strengthening as a key resource for enhancing Jewish family life. However, there can be no substitute for home, synagogue, and school as the primary settings for meaningful Jewish experiences. Ensuring Jewish continuity remains primarily an individual and family as well as communal responsibility. Religious pluralism is critical to Jewish continuity. Different Jews will require different avenues to connect with and experience Jewish tradition and civilizations. Religious pluralism--the availability of diverse models--is critical to nurturing that serious commitment. Ideological disagreements between the religious movements are healthy, as expressed with moderation and respect, both as correctives to excesses of one another and as a statement of the depth of our passionate commitment. Unfortunately, the value of religious pluralism is not universally shared among Jews today either in Israel or in the Diaspora. All Jews regardless of ideological conviction ought as an expression of **klal yisrael** affirm the importance of plurality of religious expression within American Judaism.

Recommendation: AJC should harness its human relations skills to foster greater understanding, dialogue, and ties between Jews and prevent disagreements from spilling over into delegitimation. Particular examples include the dialogue of Jewish women from all the religious movements initiated by the New York chapter. Consideration should also be given to an ongoing publication on Jewish-Jewish relations. There is no single "magic bullet" to attain Jewish continuity. Jewish continuity requires long and hard work at transmitting Jewish heritage. We must not place excessive faith in single solutions, e.g. trips to Israel, as the answer to our problems, important though such initiatives are. Single experiences may ignite interest but often lack follow up. Significant change will be necessary. We cannot content ourselves with a "business as usual" approach even if accompanied by worthwhile programs.

Recommendation: In pursuing continuity, the community needs to know which continuity initiatives are working and which are not. The American Jewish Committee is ideally positioned to guide the continuity

debate by investigating which programs are working and why, and which do not merit continued communal support. In particular, AJC should undertake a study of what models of synagogues in each of the religious movements have been especially effective in recent years. Israel is critical to American Jewish identity. Indeed, repeat trips to Israel are a prime vehicle for nurturing commitments to Jewish peoplehood. However, American Jewry requires its own distinctive Jewish ethos. Israel cannot function as a surrogate for intensive and creative Jewish living. Barring the prospect of mass aliyah, most American Jews will be challenged with the task of making Judaism attractive, ideally in close and mutually nurturing contact with Israeli society. The bonds of Jewish peoplehood have stood at the heart of Jewish group definition since the days of Abraham and Sarah. Judaism is more than a religion and a set of moral teachings. It requires identification with the Jewish people as a whole, with its historical homeland and language, and a familial closeness with Jews of all kinds everywhere. Jews, whether by birth or by choice, must consider themselves links in a great chain of Jewish tradition, a **shalsholet** (chain) that stretches across the generations binding Jews across time and across geographically as well as ideologically diverse boundaries.

Recommendation: Of particular importance have been the exchange programs sponsored by the Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations co-sponsored with the Israeli Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport and the Education Authority of the Jerusalem Municipality to foster greater sense of peoplehood and ties to Diaspora Jews within the Israeli education system. IAJIR ought address the broader issue of the meaning of a Jewish State, Zionism, and the Jewish people for the 21st century. Similarly, encounters with Jews in other Diaspora communities and engaging Israelis with American Jewry foster greater bonds of peoplehood. No society has so opened its doors to Jewish involvement and participation, as has America. This degree of hospitality represents a triumph of Jewish values and is a tribute to the initiatives of Jewish organizations. Yet a minority such as the Jewish people, living within a democratic and hospitable American culture, must both affirm what it is and define what it is not. Therefore, Jewish leaders are grappling with the critical problem of boundaries in Jewish life. Clearly, we must be inclusive in being open to any Jew interested in pursuing the meaning of his or her Jewish identity. Yet at the same time we must be exclusive in clearly defining what we are not, e.g. Jews for Jesus. This need for operational inclusivity accompanied by ideological exclusivity challenges the entire Jewish community. Jewish continuity depends upon maintaining a distinctively Judaic culture that is clear both about what it is and about what it is not.

The Jewish community must develop a multi-track approach to strengthen Jewish identity and positive Jewish experience in both in-marriages and mixed-marriages. We must reach-in and reach out.

Recommendation: In its 1991 "Statement on Inter-marriage" the American Jewish Committee affirmed:

..."AJC studies as well as other studies show that the rapidly rising number of intermarriages represents a serious risk to the vitality of the Jewish community, Jewish continuity, and identity. Clearly the Jewish community prefers that Jews marry other Jews."...

..."[T]he challenge for the Jewish community is to offer positive communal and personal connection to intermarrieds while at the same time to develop and encourage programs that lead to Jews marrying other Jews."...

..."Findings from the 1983 AJC study on children of intermarriages indicated that children of these mixed marriages, absent conversion, will seldom identify as Jews when they become adults."...

Since 1991, repeatedly studies have indicated that absent conversion of the non-Jewish spouse as few as 1 in 10 children will identify as Jews as adults. To be sure, conversion will rarely occur immediately, and the dialogue should be sustained with mixed marrieds, so as to maintain conversion as a viable possibility. Moreover, we should acknowledge that conversion remains the ideal response to the reality of mixed-marriage. However, the community ought maintain open doors to all Jews, those seeking to be Jews, and those who wish to raise their children as Jews. The American Jewish Committee should undertake careful research of who is currently converting and why, what the trends have been, and with what results.

Moreover, studies repeatedly indicate the high correlation between intensive Jewish education and Jewish

continuity. Research sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and the Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies underscored the critical importance of the adolescent years in developing attitudes towards marriage, family, and commitments to leading a Jewish life. These adolescent experiences include both formal and informal Jewish education (day schools, supplementary high schools, youth groups, and summer camps). This study ought to be widely disseminated so as to ensure that Jewish education should be considered as a continuum throughout one's life. Bar or bat mitzvah should be seen as a significant step on the continuum but certainly not the end of the road. The principle should be ensuring availability of quality Jewish education for all Jews, and no one should be denied such quality education for reasons of cost. In particular, the community must focus on the high cost of day school education and find ways to make intensive Jewish experiences and quality Jewish education more affordable for a broader cross-section of American Jews.

**Conclusion:**

The American Jewish Committee currently plays a key role in the Jewish continuity debate. Through its research, advocacy, coalition building, and human-relations skills, it has provided leadership to the community in pursuit of Jewish continuity. The ideology of consensus that served the Jewish community well in the defense of Israel and in combating anti-Semitism is, however, inadequate to the task of ensuring continuity. Different and often irreconcilable approaches will be necessary yet must co-exist within an overall spirit of "klal yisrael." Therefore, many look to the American Jewish Committee to guide a very intense and ideologically divisive discussion. The above principles and programmatic thrusts should guide us in fulfilling that role.